

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems and Sonnets by George Sterling, Raymond
Holden, Earl Daniels, and Others. — — — — —

A Special Article on Edna Millay. — — — — —

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"The Ice-Age"

IT neighs obscenely to the joyous throng—
The dirty music of a cheapened age.
The skylark, shivering in his icy cage,
Pipes a few notes and wonders what is wrong,
Then quits the thankless miracle. Ere long,
The children, chirping slang's most recent word,
Remove the feathers of a frozen bird,
Hoping to find the secret of the song.

Ma Public, in the Modern Butcher Shop,
Red with its wealth of tenderloin and chop,
Makes known her needs: a heart to stuff and bake.
Briskly the young proprietor explains,
Raising the price-tag on the thickest steak:
"No heart to-day. But here's some nice, fresh brains."

—George Sterling

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Variation on a Mythic Theme

IT is not his, who once with sunlight wore
In the locked peril of a brazen tower
The young thirst of the unpersuaded thighs,
To claim again the moment nor restore
The bud upon the stem that bends in flower
Nor change what now remembers and is wise.

If, to the subtle pattern of his mind
The love grows treacherous, betraying him
To her whose fire would shake him from his fears,
Let him go seek the craters of the blind
Cold body of the moon whose fires are dim
And dead beneath a heaven no wind clears.

If he is that fine shaft of sun he was
He will not hurry from her up the burned,
Wind-burnished heaven to the thickening shell
Of that celestial circle whence he fell
But with such permanence as burning has
Be in the lighted flesh a light returned.

The Tree

TREES seldom fall and drive men like long pins
Into the accumulated dust. This tree,
Burdened with moon to an anxiety
Spoken by little darkened leaves, begins
To be too stable in too tall a night.
Just now, you leaning back, your eye-lids making
A smoothness with your cheek and the moon breaking
Branches above to flood the smoothness white,
The tall trunk should have broken as I break
My body downward into these two hands—
Should have come toppling down from where it stands
As a man's maul comes down upon a stake
And driven me deep through tangled pipe and root
Never to hinder your unhappy feet.

—*Raymond Holden*

Sluice

THIS dam will never hold—so why pretend?
There still are flood-holes everywhere to mend.

If we had known the way to engineer
We could have built a sluice-gate in a weir
And let some water through to run a mill.

Or, since a boat can never climb a hill
And breaks itself on rocks below a falls,
We might have put the water in canals
With quiet locks and water-pressing doors
For lifting boats to several-leveled floors.
Water can save or wreck a boat on shelves
Of hidden earth. We had a boat ourselves
Whose luckless course was following tilted lands.

The water is a burden on our hands.
There is another crevice now to mend.
We shall be fitting stones until the end.

—*Louise Townsend Nicholl*

The Ship

AND I will salvage what the seas
Have left; the little they have left,
Caught in a rock's green cleft;
A spar; a bolted timber; these.

—*Kenneth Slade Alling*

Sonnets Towards Belief

I

DISILLUSION

MY hands reached ever toward one higher point.
My eyes were always lifted toward a star,
And I was breathless, having travelled far.
Dull weariness complained in every joint.

Yet rest I would not till I should anoint
My soul's head in the place where great souls are,
Till having over-passed each cribbing bar
I dwelt where life could never disappoint.

But now, alas, I know it may not be.
I know the mediocre is my best,
Although I have scorned mediocrity.

My sharp-toothed discontent yields me no rest,
But bids me thousands, daily, round me see,
Happy because no longing pricked their breast.

II

"I BUILD A WORLD"

I build a world where ugly things are barred;
A world whose bounds are eager crystal minds
Such as one, searching through the ages, finds,
By Death untouched, by grinding Time unscarred.

Four-square they stand in sightless disregard
Of fevered breathings of ephemeral winds;
Four-square they stand, their serried presence binds
Upon my heart beauty and truth, unmarred.

I sit me down within my own fair world.
The hush of all things is too sweet for song.
Banners of high romance are there unfurled,
Banners of truth above defeated wrong.

I sit me down with dreams about me curled,
And dreams and life are wonderfully long.

III

"THE CHRIST LOOKED DOWN"

The Christ looked down with torture-twisted face
Above the bowed heads of a commonprayer.
And I looked up at his poor body there,
Carved with the marks of his great pain's grimace.

I felt myself uplifted in his place.
I felt upon my brow his clotted hair.
And in my hands relentless aching where
The nails had marked humanity's disgrace.

I could not leave my God to such a fate.
Another age had hanged him on this cross.
They had chosen death, not life, to celebrate.

I choose life. And I count the death as loss.
I loose the outstretched arms, which bend again
In living blessing over living men.

IV

APPROACHING NIRVANA

Long have I labored for a futile truth.
Far have I journied, and the sun declines.
I have bowed my head at lonely crossroad shrines,
There laying down the first fruits of my youth.

My eyes are misted now with bitter ruth.
My days are lees of long unbottled wines.
I turn me back to seek the dark confines
Of some low cell, abidingly uncouth.

There will I sit and fold my quiet hands,
Very content all struggle to give o'er.
I shall not rise to open, though one stands
And knocks, and knocks again upon my door.

I shall be still as ocean-covered sands,
Placid as sunlight on a cottage floor.

—*Earl Daniels*

The House of Jason

I HAD passed my neighbor's door
A thousand, thousand times or more,
And never noticed at the jamb
The horned head of a golden ram.
But just to-night I saw it shine
Garlanded with fruited vine;
And pipe and tabor came out clear
Where I was used mere talk to hear—
Little trivial talk of trees,
Of cabbage heads, and honey bees.
But now his house was song and dance
And white-armed women of romance;
Vines were twisted through his chairs,
And pale, frail things that looked like prayers
Moved in fright among the mirth,
Grapes and ruddy fruits of earth
Wherewith the house was filled, and he,
My neighbor, who sells pork and tea,
Had such a look behind his face
As goes with swords and wines and lace.
He called *good evening* to me, yet
I knew his hair and beard were wet
With seas that lie beyond the seas
Where men ship gold and pearls and teas.
He never had a word to say
About the golden fleece that lay
Across his knees; but I could tell
That he had been as far as hell
And back that day, and in his eyes
Were now the hills of paradise.

—Robert P. Tristram Coffin

Grape Girl

GRAPES are the stain for her fingers.
Not rings. Not rubies that fire
Against her eyes, dark as rubies.
Rather the drip of grape wine that lingers
Leaving a stain. The tips
Of her hands when the moon slips
Should be vine-colored. Her throat
Burnt as a robin's note.

Before Age

THESE women, they are waiting for old age
To creep to them and wreck them of their bloom.
Their men are aging too. They hardly talk
But munch at apples in a cluttered room.

A mouse gnaws in the darkness of the walls.
A woman hugs a shawl about her shoulder.
One of the men lets fall his heavy jaw
And sleeps. Two yawn. They all are getting older.

—*Harold Vinal*

I Have a Little Secret Hate

I HAVE a little secret hate
For one unseemly man—
A delicately perfect blotch
In the imperfect plan
Of general charity I feel
Toward all my human kind—
A freckled whelp who merrily
Perverts a gentle mind.

And all my splendid public hates,
Strutting, pompous, bland,
With tridents, horns, and cloven hooves
Can never understand
The halo that my secret hate
Adjusts with careless art
Atilt his gay malignant eye
While skipping through my heart.

—*James Leo Duff*

Doubtless a Rose

THIS growing lump uncomfortably strange
Greedily sucking where my rich sap flows
This fevered tight-bound nucleus of change
Doubtless will be a rose

—*May Williams Ward*

Requiescat---

SHE should have had the state
Of a king's daughter,
Or a hut of willow branch
Near running water.

Or a scaled silver armour
For a breast cover,
Or a sweet lie in her mouth
For a lying lover.

Since she had none of these,
But a song instead,
She has well hidden herself
With the beaten dead.

Since for lack of these things
She knew herself lost,
She has well chosen silence
With her hands crossed.

—Katherine Anne Porter

Her Massive Sandal

*The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems, by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
Harpers. 1923.*

ON the whole, the world and the *Measure* take it very calmly. This poetry magazine exists in an age that has undoubtedly produced one of the poets of all time—yet it has never been seen to rejoice in proportion to the fact nor even to realize very clearly its advent. Great poetry, to be sure, has not been the *Measure's* concern. Since the magazine's birth, it has been up to its ears in mediocrity, and the journal which started by being blackly pessimistic and mistaken about contemporary poetry has survived to become the consolation of feeble talent.

In other words, our magazine has been so occupied with cultivating the soil—caring for the stalk of the sad average—that it has not had the happy leisure to see the incomparable blossom when it came. Neither the magazine's pessimisms nor its enthusiasms have paid more than passing attention to the fact that Edna St. Vincent Millay was writing in the same world, in the same language, in such a way as to make all other utterance almost banal. How strange that the same words, the identical modern cadences and turns of speech that go into the making of the *Measure* month by month, can suddenly become something quite different—such as:

I drank at every vine.
The last was like the first.
I came upon no wine
So wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at every root.
I ate of every plant.
I came upon no fruit
So wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and bean
To the vinter and monger;
I will lie down lean
With my thirst and my hunger.

This poem *Feast, My Heart Being Hungry, Rain Comes Down*, and *The Goose-Girl* distinguish the volume's first section, which has been elsewhere dismissed as trifling and childish. When Miss Millay is too sincere and simple for our age, she is called infantile; when she is brave and ironically wise, she is called flippant. The critics, usually dismayed gentlemen who are completely incapable of coping with both qualities, have said a good deal under each of these heads, while the world, meanwhile, rises with a roar to receive its poet.

Most of our assayers of literature have still hiding deep in one rococo corner of their hearts, along with a shamed liking for plush and gilt, a horrified prejudice against any woman "naked of reticence and shorn of pride," ruthless and intense in her own genius. Miss Millay is not always this troublesome magnificence whom all love and fear—but when she is not, she changes into that impious Columbine whom they fear even more, her who jests in the solemn face of Jove, and laughs at the world of puppet lovers and their miniature love. Omnipotent man does not like either the self-sufficiency of

But if I suffer, it is my own affair.

nor the whimsical comment of

Till all the world, and I, and surely you,
Will know I love you, whether or not I do.

nor that irreverent declaration:

I am the booth where Folly holds her fair;
Impious no less in ruin than in strength,

nor the jesting *To the Not Impossible Him and Thursday*. The mirth that was in Portia and Beatrice and Juliet's nurse—in all the dear ladies of Shakespeare—is not for these frightened lords. Miss Millay with Emily Dickinson has sinned arrogantly and wilfully against much that is male and pontifical and she must be told that she is a clever child, merely—naughty, if not the less charming. She who has been her own joyous elf, singing sweet songs to please herself, has been rebuked a little for such unseemly zest.

When the mood changes, and the poet intrudes with a note too fierce and disillusioned into our world of literary brocades, she is still adjured to grow up and cease such adolescent yearnings. Our literary Babbits can not admit the existence of hungry hearts beneath their corpulent vests—in fact the heart itself has become a more or less shameful organ in a world preoccupied with enamelling tiny miniatures of Restoration ladies, or voluminously glorifying the Middle-Western smoke stack. So the first poet of the land is still patronised for bitter and unhappy intensities, where she was once taken to task for having no feeling whatsoever.

Those who think Miss Millay has too much feeling to be taken as anything except a minor poet are as yet—for a brief space—in the ascendancy. Masters, Sandburg, Frost, Robinson, and Miss Lowell are said to have done that mysterious thing *express America*, whereas Miss Millay, because she uses "I"—however universally—and writes of feelings primarily, (not fences, junipers, Japanese prints, tenements, pig-pens, automobiles, and cow-lots) is dismissed by too many critics as a sort of Cavalier poet concerned with the graceful expression of youthful grief.

This is a new distinction between major and minor poetry, and to my mind a very silly one. What I value in the poets above has nothing to do with Expressing America; on the occasions when they do

write poetry, they are every bit as personal, though seldom as universal, as Miss Millay. The Express America slogan was the common ground ten years ago for those poets who had with difficulty emerged from a welter of provincialism and commercial morality—who dared not, in the face of the America they feared, claim any dignity in expressing themselves. So they placated the land, got leave to be poets, warped themselves, and failed—because they tried so hard.

I am not aware that Keats and Browning were required to Express England, and on the other hand I am perfectly certain that they did express her, individually and concretely, along with a thousand other things. Just so, Frost has poured all his feeling about his New England into one sleepy little lyric; just so Miss Millay has already given us her country-side in previous books, only as it can be given—inadvertently.

The *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* are on this account neither a surprise nor any very great delight to those of us who have long found the background of New England—its kitchens and its gardens and its weedy orchards, and its effect on the people who move over its surface—in *Portrait by a Neighbor*, *When the Year Grows Old*, *Pastoral*, *Assault*, and *Song of a Second April*. We prefer the earlier method, the less deliberate, the subjective use of a country-side to stand about the central key of a human sensation. The critics failed to observe this landscape muted to a monotone of line and color in the earlier volumes. There were no painted signposts, and so they could not be expected to see, for they were too busily following claxons elsewhere.

That Miss Millay can handle an objective problem with startling success is demonstrated in *Aria da Capo*. We did not need the present sonnet-sequence to prove her impersonal powers. None the less it is wonderfully impressive, in spite of its over-conscious workmanship, for its poignant knowledge of the facts and implements in the lives of rustic women. This detail of habit has always been in Miss Millay's poetry. She loves the doings of women. She knows how starkly and intimately woodboxes and frozen aprons, tea-kettles and ragged vines are etched on the souls of housekeeping creatures. These sonnets form an extraordinarily promising technical experiment, and Miss Millay may yet be destined to make from concrete

detail a poem as great as *St. Agnes' Eve*; but when the inspiration fails, mere work is alas no remedy, and in this task she has fallen something short of her usual success.

Departure and *Betrothal*, in Part Two of the volume, rank at once with the best of her ballads—in the same inimitable folk-manner that produced *She is Overheard Singing*, *Wraith*, *Alms*, and many others. The more popular *Ballad of the Harp-Weaver* is not nearly such a good poem, I think—its fancy fails where the feeling grows thin. *Memory of Cape Cod* and *Spring Song* are again not successful—the former being certainly one of those poems which bears more meaning for the poet himself than it can ever hold for any reader, and *Spring Song* requiring a much more lavishly fantastic treatment to carry its quaint conceit. But of the other experimental stanzas, *Never May the Fruit Be Plucked* and especially *Siege* are excellent, their brusque prose rhythms bringing an effect that music could never achieve.

Part Four with its twenty-two sonnets takes us again into that supreme world where the great sonnets of *Second April* have stood for several years. Is there anything to equal *Cherish you then the hope*, and *Not with libations*, for their final, thrilling, almost awful utterance? The sonnet in this volume beginning *What lips my lips have kissed* is as great in its own way, not chiseled and relentless—but indefinitely lonely. It is hard for me to imagine *Sonnet XXI* being excelled either, so long as the world runs, unless Miss Millay herself excels it. These two, and *Euclid* with its superb last four lines, and *Sonnet XIII*, have a frenzy that is pitted against no human love nor lover, but against the cruel structure of life and death and change—a feeling now uppermost that has always been an under-current in her poetry. And at the highest point of her imperious fury, with a bitter acquiescence added, is a statement as impassioned and severe as any creature has ever uttered:

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.
Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,

I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity,—let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

The technical excellences of these sonnets are both subtle and obvious. Aside from her own secrets of craftsmanship and the fact that her whole temperament and philosophy runs best through a sharp groove of limitations, I find an even more general reason for Edna Millay's supremacy as a sonneteer. To my mind there are two great traditions that reach through English poetry. Keats, who wrote for all desperate attempts only one lasting sonnet but many magnificent odes, is the best example of that group which tries not for an eternal sculpture of thought or feeling, but for a sort of fluid precipitation of being—an essence of mood. Here the music of words is always a trifle predominant over their meaning, richness and an ecstasy of heavy loveliness overcome the senses, and the poetry for the instant closes its sound over an everlasting experience. The other school tries not for this moment of realization, but for an electric sweep of words—a meaning—a meaning that itself becomes a sort of music, like the beauty Euclid saw. In such poetry, the phrase runs clear, while the music goes along underground like a singing river. Shakespeare, with his highly flavored love of speech, his adoration for the apt and racy word, his philosophy and darting wit, is the father of the brood of sonneteers. Against a dark screen, with the knife-like light of an X-ray, the bones of an idea fit, in their own divine harmony.

This form, which demands both abandon and reserve—pre-occupation with the geometry of life, rather than with its momentary tempo—is perfectly fulfilled in Miss Millay. She is the unforgettable artist of the words we speak; everything she writes has the endearing accent of the Celt. She manages the sonnet with severity and ease—a loose line and a taut one.

. . . . Fortunate they
Who, though once only and then but far away,
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

—*Genevieve Taggard*

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Hawaiian Magic

Hawaiian Hilltop, by Genevieve Taggard. San Francisco. Wyck-off and Gelber.

Very informally, with no more pretense than that of a beautiful mood, come these seventeen poems of Genevieve Taggard. They are all of Hawaii, and in their small number and their homogeneity bear a superficially striking likeness to Edna St. Vincent Millay's *A Few Figs From Thistles*.

The likeness, as might be expected, is superficial only. The contents of the two booklets are as different as the flame-colored cover of the present one from the green cover of Miss Millay's. It is unfair to compare them for totality of merit—Miss Taggard's is plainly the more casual. But it is interesting to observe that if the poems in *Hawaiian Hilltop* give seldom the sharp humor and pungent vivacity of Miss Millay's lighter lyrics, they carry a sheer musical beauty and a color which at its best is more than a satisfactory substitute. I suggested in the first issue of the *Measure* that Miss Millay's poetry lacks "purple," that it is marble or running water. Put into a parallel metaphor, Genevieve Taggard's is honey-colored wine, and

Hawaiian Hilltop gives a sample of its "color," though the volume by no means is suggestive of Miss Taggard's range.

The Hawaiian mood is a good one in these poems because it is usually Hawaiian without being local. Sometimes the verse seems to me to depend purely on its local interest—as in "*Kanaka Mother Goose*" and "*Skull Song*," and so to risk the transiency of all essentially local-color literature. Even "*Solar Myth*," which is certainly attractive on account of its novelty of material and viewpoint, may lack anything like enduring universal appeal. But in at least a half of the seventeen, and perhaps in a dozen of them, the poems are Hawaiian in order to be human.

The note may be one of absurd life-tragedy as in "*Portygee Love-Song*," or of poignant mood as in "*Child Tropics*," or merely a transient impression as in "*Hallucination*" or

PHANTOMS AT TEA

Into your tea, one petal,
Into my pages, two;
Above us a lattice of cherries
Embroidered on the blue

Around us the runnel of water,
Above us the shiver of shade,
As petal, by petal, by petal,
The cherry phantoms fade.

It is almost always there, translating, as Conrad does, the Pacific Islands into the world.

"*The Tourist*" is the most vivid poem in the book, and I think as vivid a picture of a moment, with its implications, as I know in modern poetry.

THE TOURIST

He saw the hula flower in her hair
Drop to her bosom where it rose and fell:
Forgotten was her lover; slow her stare
Felt for his eyes; her warm body's smell—
The yellow-stamen perfume on her breath,
The poison heavy sleepiness of death
Made all her figure's slender golden grace
Seem like a censer in an altared place.

Swinging she danced the hula, and the moon
Hung on the mountain honeying the night:
Her dress of flowers whirled about her—strewn
Along the grass the fire-petals died.
Then like a bat against the disc of light
Leaped up her lover, and the lonely wide
Hollow and shadow echoed as he cried.

Seventeen immortal poems would be enough for any poet. By grace of that fact, seventeen poems, if good enough, are enough for any volume. Immortality postponed for consideration, these seventeen are good enough. There was too much modesty, from the point of view of distribution, in publishing them in San Francisco, and, from the point of view of demand, in limiting the issue to 500 copies.

—*Frank Ernest Hill*

CONTRIBUTORS

Many of our contributors this month have been introduced before. GEORGE STERLING and JAMES LEO DUFF represent, respectively, the more mellow and the younger generation in San Francisco. The former, of course, is widely known.

ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN graduated from Bowdoin in that Annus Mirabilis 1915, subsequently taking graduate work at Princeton and at Oxford where he was Rhodes Scholar. After service in the war and further study at Oxford, he returned to America, and now teaches at Wells College. A volume of his poems, *Christchurch*, is soon to be published by Seltzer.

HAROLD VINAL, editor of *Voices*, has recently moved to New York.

MAY WILLIAMS WARD is prominent in the councils of the Kansas Authors' Club, and lives in Belpre.

The Measure

A Journal of Poetry

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